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# Countering Russia's Strategy for Regional Coercion and War

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Countering Russia's Strategy for Regional Coercion and War  
Workshop Report  
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# Countering Russia's Strategy for Regional Coercion and War



**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY**  
**Washington, DC**

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# COUNTERING RUSSIA'S STRATEGY FOR REGIONAL COERCION AND WAR

*Center for Global Security Research  
Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory*

*Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction  
National Defense University*

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Washington, DC*

**WORKSHOP REPORT**  
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*The workshop was the second in a series that began in August 2015 with a more general examination of Russia's approach to regional security and the challenges facing the United States and NATO in developing responsive strategies. Building on the August event, the January workshop looked more closely at how Russia would execute its concept for conflict in a local confrontation with NATO that escalated to a wider war. The workshop addressed two questions with important implications for how the West postures itself: How would Russia use the threat of escalation, both conventional and nuclear, to manage conflict with NATO and restrain NATO's responses to aggression? How can NATO reduce Russia's confidence in its ability to execute a local fait accompli and then control a process of escalation to secure its gains? To explore these issues, the workshop gathered a diverse group of experts from government (U.S., NATO, and selected NATO members), academia, and the think tank community.*

## **Framing the Problem: Deterrence and Escalation**

Much of the discussion since the 2014 Ukraine crisis began has focused on how Russia could exploit a local or regional political crisis (real or manufactured) to launch a military action that would result in a rapid fait accompli against one of the Baltic states (or elsewhere in eastern Europe), forcing NATO to weigh the costs and

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risks of a military response. Preventing or deterring this type of opportunistic aggression is NATO's preferred outcome and the emphasis of current efforts to strengthen its collective defense posture in support of Article 5. The workshop addressed this challenge and some alternative approaches to shoring up NATO capabilities to deter initial Russian aggression.

Less emphasis has been given to how Russia would seek to hold its advantage and then react if the Alliance acted to mobilize a large force to reverse the aggression. Here, Russia may believe it has the means to deter or restrain NATO's response through a credible threat to escalate the conflict. An initial escalation threshold is conventional – theater-level ballistic and cruise missile strikes, as well as cyber and counter-space operations, to disrupt NATO mobilization, and possible attacks on selected economic and infrastructure targets to signal a willingness to impose costs on NATO members. This would extend the conflict to the territory of other NATO states. A subsequent escalation threshold, if necessary, could be nuclear – a Russian attempt to “de-escalate” the conflict through the limited use of nuclear weapons in the theater of operations. Nuclear strikes could be directed at targets critical to NATO's military campaign, but the principal purpose would be political – to signal high stakes, resolve, and the risks of further escalation in order to compel the Alliance to reconsider its course of action.

There are important uncertainties regarding how Russia conceives and would execute a strategy of escalation control or dominance. What are the political or military circumstances that would trigger either level of escalation defined above? Are these quantifiable to any degree? Is Russia likely to view any conflict with NATO as an “existential threat” justifying the use of nuclear weapons, or is it possible to induce restraint in Moscow's behavior? Is conveying a message of reassurance and limited war aims one way to do this? Is de-escalation principally focused on coercion and deterrence, or does Russia have a doctrine for the extensive use of tactical nuclear weapons that is integrated with conventional warfighting plans?

These and related questions are being debated in the West, and intelligence agencies undoubtedly are seeking answers. But the answers may not be knowable. Russian doctrine may not identify specific thresholds for use. Or military leaders may have identified some rough thresholds but believe they lack the means to recognize them in a complex battlespace. Or the most important factor may be more political in nature – a conclusion reached by the Russian president that the survival of the regime was at risk. In the end, the decision to employ nuclear weapons is his alone (as it is the President's in the United States), and will be informed by the exigencies of the situation at hand. While it is important to study how Russia may behave in any given scenario, there is an irreducible degree of uncertainty regarding how Russia's president will act in a military confrontation with NATO. As a general proposition, Western decisionmakers should expect that Russian resolve to prevail using any means will be greatest when the leadership believes regime or state survival is at stake. But they should not assume that this belief is automatic or

beyond influence in all situations. Accordingly, western leaders need to be prepared make a determined effort to shape the Kremlin's perceptions.

Attaining greater clarity on Moscow's "red lines" may or may not be possible, but enough is known about Russian strategy to underscore the need for NATO to develop a countervailing concept and supporting capabilities. How can the Alliance reduce Russia's confidence in its ability to restrain NATO's response to aggression? Basic deterrence principles apply here. Deterring Russia from escalating a conflict will require convincing Moscow that either the costs of escalation will be too high, the benefits will be too low, or that there will be a significant payoff from demonstrating restraint in terms of achieving an acceptable outcome or avoiding an unacceptable one.

### **Deterring the Local Fait Accompli: Shifting the Paradigm**

The steps NATO has taken to date to enhance conventional deterrence, centered on the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) adopted at the 2014 Wales Summit, are an important start toward stronger collective defense. But on their own they are not likely to ensure enduring deterrence of Russian aggression, in part because they do not provide for sufficiently rapid response or the capability to overcome Russian advantages in unity of command and interior lines. Thus, they may not do enough to reduce the vulnerability of the Baltic states by denying Russia a relatively low cost option for local military action. Defining militarily effective, politically acceptable, and affordable means to raise Russia's costs is the immediate challenge. Many analysts advocate some type of "tripwire" force as the most expeditious approach to influence Russia's calculations in contemplating local aggression. Given the stakes, however, a tripwire must be backed by significant combat power in the event that it fails. NATO would have to deploy reinforcements quickly in a highly contested environment, facing Russian strike capabilities, integrated air defenses, and other anti-access/area denial capabilities, many of which would be deployed from Russian territory.

Further enhancing combat potential will rely significantly on the United States, but there are limits to the amount of force the United States will be able to commit to a conflict in eastern Europe – both in advance of such a contingency and as it unfolds. Accordingly, more must be done to leverage the existing capabilities of allied forces to buttress American efforts. Despite Washington's concerns about the willingness of some allies to use force in an Article 5 situation and the ability of allied forces to engage in high intensity conflict, the U.S. likely will press allies to develop plans and capacities to join their forces with U.S. units deployed forward to a conflict zone.

To illustrate, assuming the United States could deploy about a one and a half-division's worth of combat power to eastern Germany or western Poland in roughly two weeks' time, what heavy forces could the allies contribute and how could they get to this location in a timely way? Answering this question should be a priority for U.S. and allied militaries as they assess readiness, capabilities and plans. One U.S.

concern is that allied governments are reluctant to increase the readiness of their heavy forces, and are using the creation of new rapid reaction forces (i.e., VJTF) to defer or avoid doing so. Another concern is that allied planners are not focused on how rail and road networks could be used to move their forces eastward to link up with U.S. units positioned to counter Russian moves. To move collective planning in this direction requires a more forthright U.S.-allied dialogue.

Others argue that a strategy based principally on large scale reinforcement to roll back a Russian invasion will be less credible and more risky than one that makes a significant up-front investment in a larger, heavier force that has greater prospect for disrupting Russian military action and confronting Moscow with the prospect of immediate high costs. Such an approach to deterring Russia, of course, would be more difficult, politically and financially, for many NATO governments to adopt. An approach that did not go this far but went further than a tripwire is one that would take immediate steps to strengthen the forces of NATO members in the east, emphasizing improved ISR, modern anti-tank systems, enhanced integrated air defenses, deployable barrier systems, combat engineering, and the like.

Other discussions concerning deterrence of initial Russian aggression have raised the possibility of a multinational force in the Baltics. Such a force would seek to strengthen deterrence and speed alliance decision-making by committing a greater number of member states to the deterrence and defense mission in the east. Including American and British (and if possible, French) units would ensure that Russian aggression engaged the forces of the independent NATO nuclear states. Beyond this, a multinational forward force would have greatest impact if it included units from major members (e.g., Germany, Italy, Spain) and could be composed in units above company-size. At the political level, knowing that more allies were demonstrating a higher level of commitment would make it easier for United States to lead a NATO fight against a local Russian aggression.

More work is needed to develop and assess alternative strategies to enhance deterrence in the Baltics and raise the costs to Russia of initiating aggression to seize the territory of a NATO member. Some have suggested creating a unified Baltic force combining the armed forces of all three states. Others have argued for more effectively leveraging air, naval and unconventional forces, and for emphasizing low cost improvements to infrastructure. Whichever approach or set of actions NATO adopts likely will require allies to do more with existing forces to maximize collective combat power in conjunction with the United States. As a corollary, after many years of thinking about other military problems and viewing Russia as a partner, allied armed forces need to re-acquire a warfighting mentality suited to the deterrence and defense challenges emanating from Russia. Arguably, this is as important as meeting defense spending commitments.

Additionally, even as the Alliance takes all necessary steps to improve the local military balance and signal greater resolve to deter and respond to Russian aggression, it should consider their impact on Russian perceptions and the possible

risks of a Russian reaction that leads to greater instability. The idea is not to constrain collective defense, but to avoid unduly provocative measures that might stimulate the actions we seek to deter and look for ways to signal NATO's purely defensive goals and limited war aims to Moscow. The risk is that messages of reassurance and restraint may convey weakness rather than strength, especially if, as some believe, Russia today is acting as much out of opportunity as fear. Threading this needle will be a challenge. But doing so will be important if NATO is to demonstrate that its actions are necessary and legitimate.

### **Deterring Conventional Escalation: A Pre-Nuclear Phase**

Russian military writings are placing greater emphasis on advanced non-nuclear capabilities as instruments of escalation management, suggesting the emergence of a pre-nuclear level of deterrence. Theater-range precision strike systems (ballistic and cruise missiles), as well as counter-space and cyber capabilities, are well suited to the role of disrupting U.S. and NATO efforts to mount a response to Russian aggression and threatening key economic and infrastructure targets to signal heightened risk for NATO members and weaken their political will. These capabilities, as they mature, may allow Russia to reduce the role of nonstrategic nuclear weapons as a counter to Western high precision standoff weaponry and the initial means to escalate its way, if needed, out of a local conflict. Non-nuclear options may be seen as more credible and less risky than nuclear ones. This investment likely also reflects a determined Russian push to compete in advanced conventional systems with the United States and China and maximize its operational toolkit.

It is not clear how much confidence Russia has in these pre-nuclear escalation capabilities today. Russia can penetrate U.S. and European networks, but may not yet be able to deliver severe, enduring cyber effects. Russia can jam GPS, but as yet lacks the space-based assets to mount more significant counter-space operations. Russia's intervention in the Syria conflict has provided an opportunity to gain real operational experience with new generation strike systems, though the operating environment in a war with NATO would certainly be more challenging. However, these capabilities will improve over time. And even today, NATO would be vulnerable to missile, counter-space and cyber operations intended to disrupt a mobilization process and challenge its political resolve. NATO's ballistic missile defense (BMD) system is not designed to counter Russian missiles, though it could provide a limited capability to defend against shorter-range threats. This European-based capability probably would be augmented in a crisis by additional U.S. BMD capabilities. Russian cruise missiles might present a tougher challenge. Russia has made a major investment in modern land attack cruise missiles (LACMs) that will provide options for attacking important military and non-military targets in NATO's depth. Preferentially defending specific sites and facilities from cruise missiles is certainly manageable, but putting in place a broader area defense is far more complicated and costly given the need for a large number of airborne sensors. The



Alliance may need to broaden its conception of missile defense to consider the emerging cruise missile threat.

Likewise, NATO is not well postured to respond in kind to an advanced conventional strike campaign intended as a measured act of escalation. In particular, the post-Cold War retrenchment and re-orientation of NATO's defenses has left the Alliance with few capabilities to project power to the east, including into Russian territory. Developing such capabilities, in particular theater-range standoff strike systems capable of holding at risk key Russian targets without having to penetrate Russia's integrated air defense system, would fill an important gap. As long as the United States complies with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, such capabilities would need to be air- and sea-launched.<sup>2</sup> Cyber operations may offer a means to project power against Russia short of the nuclear threshold. At the same time, a policy that did not explicitly rule out the use of nuclear weapons to respond to highly damaging cyber or counter-space attacks could add to deterrence.

### **Deterring Nuclear Escalation: Back to Basics**

As earlier noted, the circumstances that would trigger Russian escalation to the nuclear level are not clear today from Russian documents or statements, and would be situation-dependent. A good working hypothesis is that Russia would consider an initial limited use of nuclear weapons if non-nuclear means had failed to disrupt a NATO force build-up and coerce the Alliance politically, and if its leadership believed Russia's military position was at risk, exposing the homeland to attack. A limited nuclear strike would seek to signal Russia's resolve and superior stake in the conflict, and pose the risk of even further escalation in the hope of inducing NATO to reconsider its military campaign. In fear of losing a regional contest with NATO, Russia might well be prepared to take this gamble. While Russia would characterize its action as limited in nature and an attempt to de-escalate the conflict, the view in NATO Europe likely would be quite different, raising profound fears of general nuclear war. Russia would count on this dynamic in its effort to break NATO's political will.

Moscow might be emboldened in such a course if it believed it could safely discount NATO's land-based nuclear deterrent force. It would do so if it concluded that NATO was psychologically unprepared to employ these forces or politically impaired from making the decision to do so, or if it determined that NATO's DCA force was not operationally effective. This calculation might be reinforced if Russia also concluded that the United States possessed few other nonstrategic nuclear options to respond in a way that did not carry much larger escalation risks. Assessments of both resolve and capability are likely to figure into Moscow's decision-making. How the Alliance shapes these assessments in order to bolster nuclear deterrence is critical. The goal is to undermine Russia's confidence in its ability to control a process of

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<sup>2</sup> The INF Treaty bans both nuclear and conventional ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500km and 5,500 km.

nuclear escalation without having to directly match Russia's doctrine and capabilities.

After many years as at best a secondary consideration, NATO's nuclear deterrent is receiving greater attention. The Alliance finds itself having to re-learn the vocabulary of nuclear deterrence and take steps to raise its "nuclear IQ" in response to the shifting regional security context. This does not require returning to a Cold War nuclear posture, but it does demand active preparation for a crisis that has a nuclear dimension with respect to roles and responsibilities, contingency planning, crisis response measures, and available options to deploy and employ deterrent forces.

Having assessed the role of nuclear weapons in Russia's strategy and the implications for Alliance security, the Nuclear Planning Group is now weighing options for possible adjustments to the land-based deterrent to enhance its credibility and operational effectiveness. Adjustments could address declaratory policy; intelligence and warning; readiness, training and exercises; crisis management and consultation; burden sharing arrangements; and survivability. While the question of whether NATO requires a different, more robust set of nuclear capabilities with greater perceived military utility is widely debated outside official circles, the Alliance is not at this time considering alternatives to the DCA force or existing doctrine. Modernization of the DCA force through new, more advanced aircraft and a refurbished U.S. B61 warhead is expected over the next decade.

It is not clear when agreement might be reached on a recommended set of adjustments to the DCA force. While the degree of engagement on the nuclear issue is encouraging, deliberations in this area remain sensitive politically, and building an enduring consensus for action is time consuming. Additionally, the resource implications of possible adjustments are a significant concern for many governments. In any case, some argue it may be wiser to avoid a high profile rollout of such steps in the hope of minimizing public resistance. On the other hand, as measures intended to enhance deterrence, their value lies in ensuring they are understood by the adversary. Some argue, as well, that NATO cannot embark on a project to make more than minor adjustments to its nuclear deterrent forces without also offering a strategy for renewed threat reduction in the near-term and disarmament in the longer-term.

On the question of "what to say" about the nuclear dimension of the Russia challenge and NATO's response, alliance leaders must find a way to acknowledge the importance of nuclear deterrence and say to their publics that this aspect of NATO strategy cannot be neglected and demands greater attention. Russia's actions and behavior necessitate this – though the Alliance is not going to mimic Russia in its reliance on nuclear threats. This will require going beyond standard formulations about the appropriate mix of forces. A key message to Russia is that NATO has the resolve and capability to employ nuclear weapons in a limited way to defend its most vital interests, and that Russia should not expect to "break the alliance"

through nuclear coercion. Additionally, at Warsaw and in other pronouncements, alliance leaders should convey some basic and profound truths to Russia (and the world) – that an initial use of nuclear weapons will fundamentally change the nature of a conflict, and in unpredictable ways; that the risks of even limited use of nuclear weapons are incalculable; that nuclear saber-rattling is destabilizing; and that restraint in rhetoric and behavior is in Russia’s own interest.

A comprehensive approach to deterring Russian initial nuclear use must also consider steps that can be taken with non-nuclear forces to impose costs on or deny operational benefits to Russia. Threats to escalate a conflict horizontally (i.e., geographically) or to otherwise take unanticipated actions against Russian interests could offer novel ways to impose costs. Steps to deny benefits could include preferentially defending NATO deterrent forces from missile attacks using missile defense assets; improving the ability of NATO forces (troops and weapon systems) to operate in a nuclear environment; ensuring the resilience of nuclear and more general command, control and communications networks; and developing some degree of protection against the effects of possible electromagnetic pulse attacks.

Finally, it may be possible to forestall an act of nuclear escalation by demonstrating to Russia that there is a significant benefit to be gained from not taking such a step. But inducing restraint will become more difficult as a high stakes conflict intensifies. Bounding these stakes will be key to any such effort, defining NATO’s war aims as limited and not directed at the destruction of the Russian regime or state. Mutual restraint with respect to certain target types (e.g., command and control) could help, as well.

### **Doing More at the P3 Level – Within Limits**

Regardless of concerns about the credibility and effectiveness of the DCA force – but especially if these concerns persist – NATO’s three independent nuclear powers should be considering steps that can be taken, separately and together, to strengthen the Alliance’s nuclear deterrent. Washington, London and Paris each needs to think freshly about how its national forces can contribute to this goal, acknowledging that for each, preserving maximum freedom of action for their leaders in a crisis is of paramount importance. Thus, the goal of enhanced trilateral efforts is not to promote operational integration or supersede existing bilateral mechanisms, but rather to forge greater P3 political unity in responding to Russia’s coercive strategies. At a minimum, it is important to ensure that channels for secure communication and consultation remain available during a crisis, especially one with a salient nuclear dimension.

Beyond this, there may be value in initiating an official, but informal, trilateral forum to discuss deterrence and crisis management issues related to possible contingencies involving Russia. Such a forum could be used to share intelligence on Russian doctrine and capabilities; exchange views on doctrine, planning methodologies, and plausible regional scenarios; rehearse crisis consultation with

respect to declaratory statements, force movements, and other signaling measures; and develop mutually reinforcing public information campaigns. One thrust could be to articulate a sharper P3 deterrence message that could be conveyed publicly and privately to Russia's leaders to complement or reinforce messages from NATO as a whole (such as those noted above). It may be useful, for example, to remind Russia that NATO's nuclear deterrent is not limited to the DCA force.

Far more ambitious would be joint activities, such as exercises that demonstrated to Russia a meaningful degree of P3 coordination for enhancing the readiness and crisis deployment of their respective sea-based deterrent forces. Activities of this kind, while not intended to promote operational integration, could help to ensure that in a nuclear crisis the independent nuclear forces would not be working at cross purposes but could in fact reinforce deterrence in complementary ways. Handled carefully, these initiatives should not undermine existing bilateral channels for cooperation, NATO's formal consultative and planning mechanisms, or the basic purposes of NATO's nuclear burden-sharing arrangements.

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